

December 4, 2001

The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka
c/o Ms. Julie Vincent Gunlock
Chief Clerk
Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management,
Restructuring and the District of Columbia
United States Senate
340 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Akaka:

Please accept my apologies for this overdue response to your request for information about the District of Columbia's Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA). Thank you for your recent letter and for your interest in ensuring that reform efforts in the District of Columbia impacting children and families are coordinated across agencies. I too, share this concern and believe that Mayor Anthony A. Williams' leadership in ending CFSA court-ordered receivership, along with the District of Columbia's City Council's support, will help us achieve our mission to ensure safety, permanence and well-being for children in our care.

I believe we have a moment of opportunity today in the District to strengthen all facets of the child welfare system. This opportunity is due in large part to the work of Mayor Anthony A. Williams and the City Council to address a wide range of critical systemic deficits. For example:

- We were able to successfully transition out of Federal court receivership via a consent order agreed to by the Mayor and Plaintiffs.
- CFSA's budget increased by more than \$30 million from FY2000 to FY2001.
- The District is currently implementing a major commitment to expansion and reform of the legal support provided to CFSA, with 40 new lawyers coming on board to support social workers.
- CFSA's enabling legislation required the unification of the child abuse and neglect systems, which we achieved on schedule on October 1, 2001, thus ending a fractured service delivery model identified as a barrier in providing effective services to families.

- The District has promulgated both foster and group home regulations which will make it possible to support and enforce high standards of quality.

Since my appointment as Director of CFSA on June 15, 2001, a number of significant steps have already been initiated in the process of overhauling the District's child welfare system. I have identified below the goals in our strategic plan that will guide our work in FY 2002 and some of the progress to date in reaching those goals. I believe this information will fulfill your request to determine what steps I feel must be taken to improve CFSA and what resources are needed to make this happen.

- **Recruit and Retain Social Workers.** The Agency must continue in its efforts to recruit and retain a sufficient number of social workers to keep caseloads at an acceptable level. Among the steps I have taken to get started in reaching this goal are: hired a management team to strategically plan and support the core case-carrying work of the Agency; developed a strategic plan that will guide our work in FY 2002; implemented a recruitment and retention plan; visited all of the local universities and colleges with MSW and BSW programs to seek partnerships in recruiting their graduates; hired part-time contract staff to assist with critically needed coverage, particularly in the evenings and on weekend; and secured concrete supports identified by staff as important to doing their job well and therefore to retention, including sufficient cars to make home visits as well as cell phones for case-carrying social workers.
- **Investigate Abuse and Neglect Reports.** A key part of our work over the summer in implementing the new legislation regarding the unification of abuse and neglect has been to work with the Metropolitan Police Department to develop policy and protocols for joint investigations and to provide extensive training on abuse investigations for our intake staff. We must continue to provide timely and high quality investigations of allegations of abuse and neglect in order to ensure children's safety. In addition, we will need to continue working on both training and policy development, as well as seeking to staff up further in the off-hours shifts to be able to ensure timely response.
- **Expedite Permanency for Children.** When children come into our system, we must continue to plan quickly for their future to ensure that they either return home or move to a permanent family if they cannot safely go home. We cannot leave children in the system for years without a permanent family, and we must fully involve family and community resources to make sure we are doing the best for our children.
- **Recruit and Retain Foster Homes.** We must increase the number of kinship, foster, and adoptive placements that meet the needs of our children, both by recruiting additional foster, adoptive and kinship homes and providing these parents with the supports they need to meet children's physical, mental health, educational and developmental needs. We have begun to work with Maryland with the goal of developing a border agreement that will make it easier and less bureaucratic for kinship and foster families to care for a child from the District if that is the

appropriate placement. We have also identified resources to assist families in the District with lead paint abatement, a critical issue for families who are able to provide foster care to a young child. In addition, we have published foster home regulations and the District's first-ever regulations governing group homes. On October 1, 2001, we began licensing and monitoring both foster and group home settings with the goal of supporting high quality services.

- **Promote Agency and Neighborhood-based Resources.** We are continuing to build on the strengths of the existing Healthy Families/ Thriving Communities Collaboratives to take the next step in linking CFSA's work to community supports for families. Now that we are part of the District government, we can work with communities and our agency partners to ensure that fragile families receive the early, preventive supports they need, and that families that have already entered the system are linked to supports, formal and informal, that complement what CFSA can provide.
- **Enhance the Agency Information System.** To accomplish all of these goals, we must focus on our agency information systems, so that we can make decisions based on accurate information and ensure that children never again fall through the cracks.

While these are ambitious goals, I believe that they are the right next steps to make a difference for children and families. The enactment of legislation to establish a Family Court in the District of Columbia is critical and the step needed as the District makes progress in reforming its child welfare system. We appreciate Congress' efforts to enact the Family Court legislation and hope we can count on your support.

Sincerely,

Olivia A. Golden, Director
Child and Family Services Agency

Cc: Senator Richard J. Durbin
Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, Restructuring
and the District of Columbia